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GOOD NEWS FROM VALSESIA

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BY

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CHIAVENNA
SONDRIO
VALTELLINA
UDINE
ROSSA
BALMUCCI
ROCCA PIETRA
VARALLO
CIVIASCO
BERGAMO
RONCO CANAVESE
VALSOANA
VALSESIA
VALSOANA
FARA NOVARESE
MILANO
VENEZIA
BUSSOLENO
TORINO
BASSIGNANA
S.GIOVANNI PELLICE
GENOVA
BOLOGNA
SAVONA
CARRARA
TORANO
MASSA
CARRARA
PISTOIA
PISA
FIRENZE
LIVORNO

TO THE FRIENDS OF THE EVANGELIZATION OF ITALY.

Florence, 30th November, 1896.

Dear Christian Friends,

A very encouraging religious movement is going on in the Italian peninsula, especially in the vast field of labor, which the Lord has confided to the Free Italian Church, better known to-day as the Evangelical Italian Church.

The movement has manifested itself unexpectedly and while every one was predicating slumber and indifference, on the part of the Italians, from a moral and religious point of view.

And it has come after a year of serious trouble, which this young Church, wholly composed of converts from Roman Catholicism, has been called to pass through, and which it has come out of victoriously, in so providential a way, as to remove all doubt as to the great mission which the Lord has called it to accomplish.

The fact that the movement has shown itself, at one and the same time, in six different regions of Italy, from the Alps to Sicily, and each of these distant from the other, enhances its importance.

By glancing at the accompanying map, you will see how far apart Valsesia is from Valsoana, and the districts of Carrara from the Puglie, as well as the northern part of Sicily from the South-eastern.

These are the localities, particularly blessed of God, in this season of awakening and refreshing, and we shall refer to each of them in turn, that you, Dear Christian Friends, may join with us in thanksgiving to God, for the fresh and vigorous life He has infused into the Church, as a pledge of the progress of His Kingdom, in the salvation of many souls.

Let me begin to-day by telling you of the Lord's work in Valsesia,

a celebrated and lovely valley, both in its upper and lower parts, in a mountainous region, between Novara and the Swiss frontier, with the snow-clad Monte Rosa shutting it in on the North. No scenery can be more picturesque, and no place more historical, than this theatre of the exploits of Fra Dolcino, mentioned by Dante in the 28th Canto of the *Inferno.*

The Evangelical Italian Church has labored with varying success in Valsesia for many years, from the old centre of Fara Novarese.

In 1891 two outpost Churches were planted. One was at *Varallo,* a nest of superstition, owing to the neighbouring "Madonna of the Holy Mount," which is so renowned a shrine, as to be visited by pilgrims of all classes, from ruling Sovereigns and Princes down to the humblest devotee.

The priests call *Varallo* the New Jerusalem. To evangelize in such a place was reckoned impossible. Dismal failure was prophesied, and yet in a few years the Church has trebled its membership. The other Church was at *Civiasco,* on the road to Lake Orta. Here the few but faithful brethren have, from the first, paid the rent of their place of worship and all the expenses of the Station.

Moments of difficulty have arisen, owing to the fierce persecution of the priests or to the betimes straitened finances of this young Evangelical Italian Church, but the Committee has maintained its ground and been very courageous.

The Evangelist at *Varallo* has gone his rounds, summer and winter, among these alpine heights, visiting regularly all the "Comunes" large and small, selling the Word of God, distributing tracts, and preaching Jesus Christ.

Often has his life been threatened by fanatical papists and many a hairbreadth escape from mist and tempest can he narrate. On one occasion, when returning home all alone, in a pitch dark night, from one of these excursions, he fell into a deep ravine. By a miracle his life was saved, and only a simple dislocation confined him to the house for a while.

And now we approach the time, from which we date the new era of prosperity in the evangelization of the Valley.

Early in 1895, Signor Furlanetto, the Evangelist, was violently opposed by the Romish preachers, and he seized the opportunity of replying in the most Christian way, in a short, effective, Gospel tract, of which thousands of copies were distributed.

And other things were happening which God was about to overrule for good.

Here is the singular occurrence which took place in April of this

year. It was in *Roccapietra,* a town of 900 inhabitants, about four kilometers from *Varallo.* No place was so hostile to the Gospel as this. An old Christian Brother had long labored for the conversion of the town, but it seemed labor in vain. At last an excellent father of a family was brought to Christ, and our hopes revived. But he too found it seemingly impossible to communicate to others the joy and peace which reigned in his own bosom. There was nothing for it but to go forward in faith, praying that the seed might at no distant day be blessed. And this is the expectation which has now, thank God, been crowned with success.

But how did it all come about, you ask, Dear Christian Friends; what was the special occasion for the manifestation of God's converting grace? Well, it appears that although *we* were not greatly encouraged, there were others who were greatly *discouraged.* The Bishop and higher clergy of Novara had become alarmed at the spread of the Gospel in the diocese. They resolved to stop it, and for this purpose, they sought to remove all the old clergy, and to substitute them with younger men of greater bounce and pretension. As usual, many districts took no action, while others sent embassies to the Bishop, imploring him to let well alone. Among these was *Roccapietra,* which was resolved not to lose their good-natured old priest.

The Bishop, however, remained inflexible, and so the people deserted the Church Services. There was a great ferment, almost revolution, for two months. Arrests and lawsuits and fines were the order of the day. Exasperation reached its height. The wise old men said: "Where we ought to find charity and christian teaching, we have found pride and cruelty, and where we looked for justice, injustice! Let us become Protestants!"

No sooner said than done, for the son of Signor Furlanetto, who was in *Rocca* that day, was stopped on the highway by several persons, who said to him: "Tell your father that to-morrow we are all going to Service in your Church."

"When I heard this," said the Evangelist Furlanetto, in the recent General Assembly, "I collected chairs from all quarters and improvised benches to accommodate as many as possible, and prepared a special discourse for the occasion.

"On the Sabbath morning I could see, from the window, a multitude of people coming along the road, like an army. I was moved to tears, and prayed the Lord to give me utterance and unction, that I might touch these hearts. I knew they were drawn to me, through dislike of their Bishop, and I longed that they might find that good part, which should never be taken away from them.

" The place of worship and the two stairs were crowded to suffocation, and the surrounding streets and fields presented a novel but comforting spectacle." And an eye witness testifies, that there was no confusion. The behaviour of the people was admirable. Though humble, they evinced the most delicate respect and the most sincere devotion. They listened silently, fixedly, sympathically, and lost neither a word nor a gesture of the Preacher. Those who were able to hear were delighted, and said they never dreamt of taking part in such a serious and edifying Service, and that the priests were incapable of convincing and moving the people, as the Protestant Minister did.

" For three weeks these good people attended our Service with increasing interest," continues Furlanetto. " Yet all this time most earnest entreaties were made to me, that I should go and preach in their own town. With great joy I accepted, but the difficult problem was how to find a place of worship for so many people. At last a Christian Friend gave us the inner court of his house, and at the last hour an even more central and capacious place was offered and accepted.

" But how about the furniture? We had to make a virtue of necessity, and as soon as the Sabbath morning Service at *Varallo* was finished, the chairs and table and Bible were transferred in a wagon to *Roccapietra,* to be brought back to *Varallo* at night!

" My first Service was on Pentecost, and such was the crowd and the heat, that a man fainted and had to be carried out. Signor Silva came to us from Milan on Corpus Domini, and preached morning and evening with great power. In demonstration of sympathy, the people came with two bands of music and played under the windows of our Hotel. Secretary Fera visited us later on, and preached to a crowded and earnest throng, and so far as I can learn, the whole city is in full accord with us, and I feel sure that the mass of the population will never leave us.

" In the meantime the labor became extremely fatiguing. *Varallo, Civiasco* and *Roccapietra* were three names which, even in my sleep, I never forgot. On Sabbaths I had not even time to eat. The urgency of a helper was evident, and so the Committee sent me one of our Students, Signor Francesco Prisinzano, during his holidays, and we have worked together in thorough harmony and with great joy, over the manifest breath of God's Spirit on the people.

" Of course, the Bishop of Novara was very far from quietly accepting the loss of so many people. From his band of priests he chose a young man, full of talent and fighting energy, who heaped opprobrious epithets upon us in the hotels and streets, and insulted

men, women and children, believing that this was the most effective means for gathering in the sheep again to the fold.

" The result was that he celebrated mass in the presence of three women and one old man, who were unaware of what was going on.

" What a disillusion for a man who thought by a few words to recal to its duty a whole Community! It seems incredible, and yet this is what happened to this vain glorious person, who thought to drive us forth discomfited from the town. God showed him that a man can do nothing successfully against the Truth of Christ, for while he was obliged to ask to be transferred to another parish, for want of parishioners, our " upper chamber " remains crowded with hearers, the greater part of whom are already sincere converts through the preaching of the Gospel.

" The Parish Church still remains empty, so that one night some wag wrote in cubital letters on its walls, " Magazine to sell or let: for information apply to the Bishop of Novara."

" On our side the Work is carried on earnestly and yields us the greatest comfort. We feel that we are but fellow laborers with God, who has begun this movement, and it is to Him alone we look for grace and strength to develop it more and more, until it results in a flourishing Church of believers, in these days of general incredulity and priestly arrogance.

" Before showing the immediate influence of this movement on the other Comunes in the glen, let me quote the testimony of Signor Prisinzano after two month's experience: " Those who have enrolled their names," he says, " give evidences of conversion, courage and disinterestedness. One could write a volume, if one wished to note all the manifestations of joy, enthusiasm and faith, as we go from house to house, among these dear people.

" We are forced to exclaim: " Here is a genuine conversion, and there is another." They speak with their hearts in their mouths. They talk about Jesus as if they had known and followed Him for years. They testify of their restoration to religious feeling, with a grace and sincerity which bring tears to our eyes.

" They make such solemn vows for the future of their lives, that one can hardly doubt their veracity.

" In short, it is a great consolation to see a majority of these people, who have hitherto lived in the grossest religious superstition, accepting jubilantly the Gospel, expressing their satisfaction with the step they have taken, and bidding an eternal Adieu to the past. " Even though our old parish priest were to return," they say, " we would never abandon the Gospel."

" The Pretor of *Varallo,* strolling with a friend, met a young *Rocca* girl of his acquaintance, and jokingly said to her: " Well, have you Rocca people really decided in your hearts to become Protestants? " To which she resolutely answered: " Protestants or not, we have decided to follow Jesus Christ, and to abandon for ever the mummeries of the priest."

" Another young woman silenced two tempting, curious enquirers, by replying: " Come with us. Hear but once the exposition of the Word of God, and I assure you that you will remain with us. Even on the absurd supposition that we are going wrong, you will go with us." These strong and spirited words, the expression of so thorough a conviction, so wrought upon her tempters, that they promised to go to the Gospel Church, and they kept their word.

" The Gospel hymns are being chanted all round about us in rustic melody. Young people are seen reading the New Testament on the public road, and all of them feel the need of speaking to us, and offering something, and they long for the day when they can build a Church of their own, which it is calculated would not cost more than £ 150 Sterling, the people carting the materials and giving their labor."

And now to resume, in the language of Signor Furlanetto: " Such an occurrence as this turning of *Roccapietra* away from the Church of Rome to the Gospel, could not fail to excite curiosity up and down Valsesia, not only as to the reasons of the difference between the ecclesiastical authorities and the entire population, which now delightedly listens to the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, but also as to becoming acquainted with the Evangelicals and their doctrines. In point of fact, we have lately noticed large numbers of persons from all parts of this wide and populous region, coming to our Churches, in order to study more closely who we are, and what we believe and what we aim at. Those with whom we converse, express themselves as greatly pleased with what they have seen and heard. *Roccapietra,* in short, has been the means in God's hand, of awakening the religious sentiment among the neighbouring Comunes, and now everybody wishes to hear us in their own homes.

" As it was impossible for us to satisfy all of them, we have limited ourselves to the more central places, such as *Folecchio di Rossa,* where we have established the good Work and where the Word of God has had free course.

" Here is how we were led of God to set up our tent in *Folecchio di Rossa.* A woman of *Civiasco,* some time ago brought to Christ, went to live in this town of 700 inhabitants, ensconced on a precipitous cliff, so that, seen from below, it looks like a nest for birds!

" This good woman felt the need of telling to others, in her new abode, the precious truths, which the Lord had taught her. Other women were not slow to observe how happy she was, as she said to them: " Poor though you see me, in this humble position, I am the richest woman in the world," and then spoke to them of Christ, and His priceless Gospel, and went about singing hymns on the highway.

" Very soon her hearers were anxious to hear for themselves the preaching of the everlasting Gospel. One lovely Sabbath day I saw them coming into Church and listening with great interest, to the glad tidings of Salvation.

" They became truly moved and convinced, that there was no other way of truth and righteousness but in Christ, and in what the Apostles had written concerning Him, and exclaimed: " Now we are Evangelicals! "

" At least three times they came down to *Varallo* and *Roccapictra,* and each time they returned so happy and pleased with what the Lord was working in their hearts.

" At last they invited us to visit them, and with gladness Prisinzano and I accepted. We thought it was only a private visit we were making, but, to our great surprise, after warming ourselves at a good fire, and partaking of the simple meal they had prepared for us, we found that another part of the house had been put in order for a Gospel Service. There were plenty of chairs for the worshippers, and a table covered with a cloth, and a reading desk bearing a large Bible and a splendid bouquet of deliciously perfumed mountain flowers!

" Better still, we learned that the whole town was anxiously waiting to hear us. At 2 o'clock the large Hall was crowded with men and women, and with our hearts full of holy enthusiasm, we spoke, as the Lord gives grace to speak on such unexpected occasions, and they were all persuaded, that we had not uttered the fancies of our own minds, but the holy verities of the Son of God.

" At the close of the Service, we were surrounded by our joyous hearers, and made formally to promise that we should return at least every Wednesday. You may imagine how pleased we were to make such a promise. And we found that nothing else was spoken of during the whole week, in that place and in many surrounding hamlets, but the preachers and their preaching: the truth in Jesus Christ.

" On my next visit," continues Signor Furlanetto, " another grateful surprise awaited me. These women had ascertained that many would ascend the hill, to the Meeting, from the large township of *Balmuccia,*

and so they had secured a larger Hall, and had a quantity of benches arranged instead of chairs, with lights and flowers in profusion. At the hour fixed, the place was crowded, and I was listened to, for a whole hour, with the most earnest attention. The greatest sympathy was again shown, and renewed entreaties made for the continuance of the good Work.

" From that day we have not failed to go, on a single occasion, and are able to say that the Work is assured, for there are already many genuine conversions.

" As if this were not enough employment for two Christian laborers, another town, in the providence of God, has pleaded with us to go also to them and establish a Service in their midst. That town is *Balmuccia,* with 600 inhabitants. Near by there is another Sanctuary, called after the *Madonna dei Dinelli.* The *Balmuccia* people still come to the Services at *Folecchio di Rossa,* but they have already gathered enough money to secure a place of worship and to furnish it suitably."

Signor Furlanetto further mentions a circumstance, which enables one to judge of the great progress of the Gospel in these districts. The priests of *Varallo,* owing to the wet and stormy weather of last summer, organised a pilgrimage to the miraculous Crucifix of Bocca. " I forget," he says, " whether it perspires blood or water, but something of that sort it is said to do." Going from door to door, they asked the support of the people. A certain woman received them courteously, but said: " I am sorry not to be able to acquiesce in your request at this time. Come on Monday, and I will give you a definite answer." Naturally they wished to know the reason of her reserve. And what do you think she had the courage to say in reply? " It is now a long time that I have desired, for better or for worse, to hear the Evangelicals preach. I now feel constrained to carry out my wish, and I purpose doing so on Sunday next."

The priests were astonished and spoke angry and threatening words, but nothing moved the woman from her decision. On the following Lord's Day, therefore, she heard Signor Prisinzano preach, and to my wife and to several of the brethren she said: " This is precisely what I was seeking for. Now I believe! " After dinner she came to *Rocca,* and heard me preach, and said to us all: " I will never turn away my heels from the Evangelical Church! " She is now firmly convinced that Christ is her Saviour, and glories in nothing, save in bearing testimony to the faith which she has reposed in Him."

And now, Dear Christian Friends, let me close by saying, that the future of this movement in Valsesia surely promises well, if we had

the means at our disposal, to send at least other two or three preachers, to all the different towns that are longing to hear the Gospel, such as *Serpello* and *Morondo*, and which are already in cordial relationship with us.

We, therefore, earnestly ask every one who reads these tidings, to help us by their prayers and sympathies and urgently needed gifts, to press forward this great Work which the Lord has given us to do.

We render all praise to God for granting us this gracious revival, and look alone to Him, for all the strength and courage and zeal necessary for the ingathering of souls into His blessed Kingdom.

With kindest regards,

Yours very sincerely,
SAVERIO FERA.

PS. — In our next letter, we shall speak of the movement in the Valsoana and Carrara districts, and in a third, of the same Work in the Puglie and Sicilian regions.

Latest News. — As we go to press, we learn that a place of worship has been rented at *Balmuccia*, where the majority of the inhabitants are making ready enthusiastically to inaugurate the Service.

Also that the entire liberal party of *Cellio* has invited our Evangelists, and that they have fixed to go, on 8th December, to preach the Gospel to that people. We ask earnest prayers for a blessing.

Contributions for the Evangelical Church of Italy in this crisis will be thankfully received by the following Gentlemen.

London, Messrs. Barclay and Co., 54, Lombard Street.

» Rev. George H. Giddins, Memorial Hall, Farringdon St., E. C., London.

Edinburgh, Messrs. Kinmont and Maxwell, W. S., 57, Hanover St., *Treasurers of Edinburgh Committee.*

Glasgow, Wm. Martin, Esq., 341, St. Vincent St., *Treasurer of Glasgow Committee.*

Belfast, Sam.[l] Mac Bride, Esq., Westbourne, *Windsor avenue.*

New York, John J. Tower, Esq., 340, Clinton St., Brooklyn, *Treasurer of American Committee.*

Florence, Rev. Dr. John R. Mac Dougall, *Chiesa Scozzese, 11, Lung'Arno Guicciardini.*